

Let's Make a Deal: Bargaining as an Expression of Grief

By Arleta James, PCC

As a parent, do you feel like every request becomes a bargain? You ask, "Would you please bring your laundry downstairs, and your child replies, "I will if you let me go to Tommy's house." You say, "It's time for dinner." Your son or daughter replies, "I'll sit down when you let me have a pop instead of milk." Adoptive family life can resemble the game show, *Let's Make a Deal*, and adoptive parents can feel like this game show's original host, Monty Hall!



This chronic need to bargain and deal is actually reflective of unresolved grief. The child who has experienced various traumas—abandonment, abuse, neglect, institutionalization, multiple moves—arrives in the adoptive family with many feelings for all of the losses he or she experienced pre-placement. Most often, the child with a history of trauma expresses feelings via negative behaviors—bargaining is one of these behaviors. Parents may also find that the typical children act in ways indicative of grieving post-placement. The children already present in the family at the time of the adoption often harbor their thoughts and feelings about the changes that have occurred in the family since the arrival of their new brother or sister. Frequently, the typical siblings believe that a positive attitude is expected, or sensing that Mom and Dad are under much stress, the healthy children may feel that voicing their concerns will only serve to heighten their parents' distress. Other resident children are not certain how to discuss their emotions. So, these healthy children's anger, sadness, frustration, etc. also begins to seep out through negative behavior.

Grief, as described by Kübler-Ross, consists of five stages: shock/denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and ultimately acceptance. Children (and adults) fluctuate among these stages rather than pass through them in an orderly progression.

- Shock/Denial—The individual can't believe or refuses to believe what is happening. "I really can't be moving! My birthparent must be coming back!"
- Bargaining—This stage is an attempt to make a promise or deal in order to achieve an improved situation.

Mark was adopted when he was 8-years-old. He was removed from his birth parents at age 4 due to domestic violence that jeopardized his safety. He was then placed with his birth grandmother with whom he resided for the next three years. Mark's grandmother determined that her age prevented her from parenting Mark until he was an adult. As such, she worked with her

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local county agency to find an adoptive home for Mark. Patti and Greg saw Mark's picture on the Internet and applied to adopt him. After several pre-placement visits, Mark moved in. Subsequently, Patti, Greg and Mark went to court and the adoption was finalized. Patti and Greg are a family with a strong faith. They attend services regularly and volunteer for many church related activities. Mark learned to enjoy church as well. One day while on their way to help out with a bake sale, Mark said, "If we get my birth mother to come to church, she could become a good Christian and a good Mom. Then I could live with her and see my grandma more often ." Needless to say, Patti and Greg were shocked by Mark's statements. They had no idea he harbored a plan—a bargain—to reunite with his birth family.

As the above vignette makes clear, bargaining usually includes internal irrational thoughts, often in an "if..., then..." format. As other examples: Adopted children think, "If I act bad, I'll get back to my birth family." "If I had been a better kid, I would still be with my birth family." "If my birthmom had just left her abusive boyfriend, we would still be together. If she leaves him now, I can go back." Typical sons or daughter may believe, "If I was a better brother, my adopted sister would act okay." "If she went back to China, my family would be happy again."

- Anger—"I resent the time he (adopted brother) takes up!" "I would never get away with the things she (adopted sister) does!" "I hate the way he treats my family!" "I hate my birthparents for leaving me!" "I am so mad I don't get to grow up with my birth siblings! Anger varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage. Anger is more pronounced in situations in which the person feels he has no control over the events that have or are occurring. Certainly, children lack control over being adopted or their parents decision to adopt.
- Depression—This is a period of great sadness. There may be decreased interest or pleasure in activities or hobbies. There can be a loss of energy or feeling tired. Many experience a change in appetite with significant weight gain or weight loss. Sleep patterns may be interrupted—sleeping too much or too little. Making decisions or concentrating is difficult. Feelings of hopelessness, guilt and worthlessness prevail as does irritability—a main symptom of depressed children.
- Acceptance—This stage may also be referred to as integration or reorganization. There may not be total happiness in this stage, yet there is peace, movement forward, understanding of what has happened and coming to terms with what may not change. Anger and depression dissipate—periods of accepting the loss last longer than the periods of sorrow and rage.

Factors which affect the capacity of the individual to move through the grieving process include the nature of the loss. A sudden, unexpected loss is believed more difficult to grieve. The level of significance of the loss is also important. The loss of a child or parent is considered among the hardest losses to grieve. The willingness to experience the feelings associated with the loss is another critical factor in the process, as is the quality of support systems.

In order to cease the daily dealing, we must facilitate the grief beneath. We must help children resolve their trauma and cope with post-adoptive changes in their families. Some previous articles which offer suggestions in these areas include:

Typical Children: Afloat on a Sea of Grief

This is Not the Brother or Sister I Expected: The Need to Prepare for the Typical Children

Talking with Children about Their Orphanage Background: A Guide to Using "Borya and the Burps" – Part One and Part Two

"Their Past:" Photos, Video, Audiotape and More...

Books, Movies and Websites for Typical and Adopted Children